

An Austrian's Pictures of War

Horror, Shaded With Poetic Beauty, in the Book of an Officer Who Hates That Which the Prussian Brought Upon the Land

MOST war books are ephemeral, but *Men in War*, by Andreas Latzko, deserves to live. It has all of the flaming red realism that characterizes many personal narratives of the war, and it has in addition an artistry of style that sets it far above them. Inevitably it challenges comparison with Barbusse's *Under Fire*, and not to its disadvantage. With no less power than the French novel, it succeeds even better, because of its different form, in conveying impressions of the hideous vastness of the war, and in interpreting its effect on individuals and on society.

Since *Under Fire*, by the French soldier, is a novel showing war as touching a certain group of persons, it necessarily has its angle of observation fixed and the scope of its vision limited. *Men in War*, by an Austrian officer, is a series of pictures revealing war's devastation of character as well as of human life and material property. These pictures are of widely variant groups of persons. The book is not a novel, since the chapters are disconnected, save for their common relation to war. Nor are these narratives short stories, for they have not, except in the case of the sardonic episode entitled *Home Again*, the structural form of the short story. They are rather impressionistic descriptions, extraordinarily vivid and poignant.

These scenes that the author describes are made actual for us, distinct in their unforgettable outlines of beauty or of horror, yet with a diaphanous veil of poetry over them that but serves to heighten the effect. Their realism is so dreadful at times as to be naturalism, yet without the hideous repulsiveness of Zola's descriptions or the revolting character of some passages in *Under Fire*. The poetic style softens the otherwise unbearable for us. Yet even in scenes of romantic beauty there is ever the sinister presence of horror.

Realism Softened by Poetry.

A quotation from the first chapter, describing a hospital town sixty miles from the battle front, may give an idea of his methods:

"The cannons growled in the distance, as if a gigantic dog were crouching way below the ground ready to jump up at the heavens, snarling and snapping. The muffled barking of the big mortars came from over there like a bad fit of coughing from a sick room. . . . Even the long low rows of houses shrank together with a rattle and listened horrorstruck each time the coughing convulsed the earth, as though the stress of war lay on the world's chest like a nightmare.

"But the beautiful wrought iron fountains continued to gurgle and murmur complacently, prattling with soothing insistence of the days of their youth, when men still had the time and the care for noble lines and curves, and when war was the affair of princes and adventurers. Legend popped out of every corner and gargoyle, and ran on padded soles through all the narrow little streets, like an invisible gossip whispering of peace and comfort. And the ancient chestnut trees nodded assent, and with the shadows of their outspread fingers stroked the frightened facades to calm them."

Through each avenue of sense impression we are made to realize war. The shriek of the shrapnel, with its threat so fierce that the sound seems vis-



ible, a screaming semicircle in the air, ending with a whiplike crack; the corpses in their blue rigidity; the evil odors of corruption; the touch of bodies long dead, all are told with acid words.

Latzko speaks of a green slope adjoining a battlefield:

"A short turn and the greenness vanished! All life succumbed, as if roared down by the cannons, by the howling and pounding that hammered in the valley like the pulsating of a colossal fever. Shell hole upon shell hole yawned down there. From time to time thick, black pillars of earth heaped up and for moments hid small parts of this desert burned to ashes, where the cloven stumps of trees, whittled as by penknives, stuck up like a jeering challenge to recognize the landscape this once had been, this field of death and refuse, before the great madness had swept over it and sown it with ruins, leaving it like a dancing floor on which two worlds had fought for a loose woman."

The author's imagery of description is vivid and individual, his metaphors apt and illuminating. Here is no mere conventional picturing of battlefields; scenes that will not fade stand revealed to us.

A Grim Group of Characters.

The delineation of character is as convincing as the description of scenes. Each man or woman mentioned has a living individuality. There is, for instance, the landsturm officer, gone mad over brooding on the war, "a marionette with broken joints" who began to speak hastily "in a falsetto like the crowing of a rooster."

"What was the most awful thing about war? The awful thing is the going off. You go off to war, and they let you go. That's the awful thing."

There is Captain Marschner, whose kind heart shrinks from sending his men to certain death, and who suffers from the ridicule of his subordinate, a twenty-year-old boy with no thought but of the

medals and promotion he must win. Yet the compassionate captain and the young man harrying his men like a butcher driving oxen alike go to death. There is John Bogdan, once a handsome coachman, now a dehumanized wreck, with a face so torn and mutilated that his intimates fail to recognize him when he comes home again; home, to find that his lord has taken his sweetheart.

There is General X, victor of —, who drives the wounded soldiers out of the parks because, forsooth, they make the landscape ugly for the officers and their friends who must have opportunity to sip their coffee and eat their little cakes in pleasant ease while listening to the military band. There is the faithful Miska, crouching doglike at his dying master's feet. There are many others, each limned in such lifelike colors that we say, "They are."

No Book for a Prussian.

In effect, the book is an accusation of the war that Germany brought upon the world, an arraignment of the German attitude toward war, of the militaristic domination, of the hopeless subjection of the people.

In several instances, the passionate protests are put into the mouths of insane men, but of men driven mad by the war, hence we do not feel that this is a literary subterfuge to dodge responsibility. There is no doubt as to the writer's feeling in the matter.

He plainly hates this war and holds that Germany is wrong in spirit. The first chapter accuses the women of Germany for permitting the war, for not throwing the weight of their power against it, for sending their men away to death. The symbolism of the militaristic idea is shown in the chapter entitled *A Hero's Death*, where the dying officer in his madness thinks that the heads of all the soldiers have been taken off and phonograph discs playing war music screwed on their places, so that they know nothing but war.

Here is a passage from the chapter *Home Again*: "Sitting on the bench opposite the station with the sign of the village in view, a short name, a single word, which comprised his whole life, all his memories, hopes and experiences, John Bogdan suddenly thought of one of the village characters, Peter the cripple, who had lived in the tumbledown hut behind the mill many years before, when John was still a child. John saw him quite distinctly, standing there with his noisy wooden leg and his sad, starved, emaciated face. . . .

"John Bogdan gnashed his teeth in a rage that he had not thought of Peter the cripple in the hospital. Then he would have given those city people a piece of his mind. He would have told them what he thought of their silly, prattling humbug about the fatherland and about the great honor it was to return home to Maresa looking like a monkey. If he had the doctor in his clutches now! The fakir had photographed him, not once, but a dozen times, from all sides, after each butchery, as though he had accomplished a miracle, had turned out a wonderful masterpiece."

It would be extremely interesting to know more about the author of this book, and of how he dared to write in such frank fashion. We may be sure the volume will not be circulated in Germany.

MEN IN WAR. BY ANDREAS LATZKO. Boni & Liveright. \$1.50.